AMATEURADIO

News of the Amateur Radio and Amateur Satellite Services

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Earthquake!

by Brad Humphrey of the Atascadero News

ATASCADERO, CA — When the earthquake hit the small oilfield town of Coalinga at 4:43 p.m., May 2, Atascaderan Mel Brown was on a beach in Guadalupe. By 7 p.m. that evening he was getting a first-hand look at what a 6.5 magnitude earthquake can do.

A ham operator for the last three years, Brown and two other San Luis Obispo County residents loaded some radio gear, including a portable generator, into a truck and made their way to Coalinga.

Although the town was sealed off, the three men were quickly welcomed into the ravaged community where they immediately set up what was soon to be the first emergency communications with the outside world.

The three were first sent to the Coalinga Police Department because a generator was needed at that location to restore power. Brown was later sent to West Hills College where he assembled his radio equipment inside the gymnasium.

Throughout the evening Brown kept relaying messages. Later the Kings County and Fresno Amateur Radio Clubs set up a command post using Fresno's mobile van.

Continued on page 3

This photo shows typical damage that occurred during the Coalinga, California earthquake. The quake disabled telephone and power lines in the small California town.

(Atascadero News photo)

Relinked to Outside World

by Gene Rose of The Fresno Bee

COALINGA, CA — Amateur Radio operators from throughout the San Joaquin Valley were among the unsung heroes of the Coalinga earthquake in early May. Within minutes of the quake, dozens of hams were either on their way to Coalinga or involved in relaying vital messages from the stricken community.

With the telephone and power lines down, the local hams provided some of the earliest information and vital communications to the outside.

Among other tasks, the Amateur Radio operators summoned ambulances and other emergency equipment, serving as a relay service for both public and private agencies.

All told, nearly 70 amateurs from around the Valley were involved, furnishing the first emergency radio service in the area during those first 24 hours after the quake.

Allen Ross, 69, a retired Fresno-area trucker and ham radio operator, said the hams provided a vital service during the critical hours when there was so much confusion.

Ross said he was in his kitchen when the quake struck, but went immediately to his radio room and turned on his unit, only to discover 20 to 30 hams on the air trying to figure out where the quake had struck.

"There was a lot of confusion at first, but we gradually got things quieted down, and I started asking for volunteers and others to work the emergency van. Within 15 minutes we got 20 operators that would work here or who would go with me and the mobile van to Coalinga."

Throughout that long night, the hams relayed hundreds of messages, not only for health and safety agencies, but phone messages for the news media and Red Cross.

By the second afternoon, Ross was restocking the van — just in case another disaster or emergency occured elsewhere.

But what are the rewards for working around the clock in a darkened and devastated area?

"It's the satisfaction of helping people ... of softening a crisis or a disaster," Ross replied.

"They call us amateurs, but we have a lot of professionals when it comes to helping."

Ham operator Scott Thompson, from Visalia, said hams from as far away as Bakersfield and Merced were involved in the Coalinga crisis — all contributing their time and talents to the job of emergency communications.

"In a disaster, it seems phone lines are very susceptible to problems, especially with the extreme loads. And the phone lines in Coalinga have been very fragile. Consequently, supplemental communications are very important."

He said the hams do not originate messages; rather they relay messages from one agency to another, at other frequencies or where radio contact is unavailable.

"That's what the amateurs do. They come complete with all the equipment, and it's free," Thompson said.

(Reprinted with permission from The Fresno, CA Bee)

Tom Akin, Allen Ross and Biggie Burkholder with the Amateur Radio emergency radio unit. The communications van provided some of the first communications to the outside world during the Coalinga, CA earthquake.

(photo courtesy of The Fresno Bee)

Along League Lines

Continued from page 4

rience in emergency communications practices.

During the SET, each Amateur Radio Emergency Service group simulates an emergency condition and goes into operation accordingly. The National Traffic System is tested by participating ARES groups and individuals. NTS is activated on a "simulated emergency" basis to enable handling of such traffic, more swiftly than normal, just as it would be under real emergency conditions.

October 15 and 16 U.S. amateurs will forego football games and family outings to sharpen a skill they hope is never needed. Radio amateurs are willing and able to lend communications assistance whenever disaster strikes. That's what SET is all about.

Family Saved by Amateur Radio

SANFORD, FL — Frank Ambrose and his wife Barbara, both Amateur Radio operators, were traveling east on Highway 46 one April afternoon between Sanford and Mims when they spotted a pick-up truck that skidded into a water-filled ditch. The cab was in the water. Frank stopped to investigate and found a man, his wife and two small children trapped inside. They were in danger of drowning as the truck was sinking into the ditch.

Using the portable Amateur Radio unit in his car, Frank called for help via an Amateur Radio repeater, located in Sanford. A repeater is an automatic retransmission device that receives signals from low-powered equipment and boosts them, enhancing longer distance communication. For maximum efficiency, repeaters are located atop mountains or high towers. A repeater's useful range is typically 100 miles.

Bill Irwin, another amateur located in DeBary, responded to the call and contacted a local rescue squad, using an Amateur Radio autopatch. An autopatch is a device that connects radio gear to the telephone system. Telephone calls can thus be made using Touch-Tone® signals transmitted over the radio, through the autopatch device, which is connected to the telphone lines.

Within twelve minutes, emergency assistance arrived and rescued the trapped family.

—Bill Wimberly

Earthquake!

Continued from page 1

By midnight the San Jose Area Red Cross had also set up emergency radio equipment. Brown was soon joined by ham radio operators from throughout the state.

Brown's primary concern was to look for disrupted utilities such as broken sewer and gas lines and other life threatening situations. His job was to relay messages to the proper authorities in case a situation needed immediate attention.

"It was an incredible feeling — disbelief. I lived in Coalinga from 1970 to 1973 and the city had made a big effort to fix up the downtown area. One downtown street had been blocked off and a mall was built," Brown recalled.

As things seemed to be getting under control, ham radio clubs began to schedule communication teams to work shifts. By Wednesday, Brown was back in Atascadero.

Brown explained that for a while ham radio was the only communication source except for some pay phones in Coalinga. And he added that media representatives across the nation kept those phones tied up.

Brown, who is modest about his volunteer effort, said the real hero is a radio repeater built by a Coalinga area Amateur Radio club.

"That repeater picked up the signals and rebroadcast the emergency messages. It would have been a hell of a lot tougher [to relay emergency messages] without that repeater," Brown said.

Brown explained that ham radio operators are committed to using their radio skills and equipment to help in all sorts of emergency situations. Before each person can legally operate his own radio he must first be properly trained and licensed.

He added that the satisfaction of being able to help makes it worthwhile. Besides, Brown admitted, he had a lot of fun too.

(Reprinted with permission from the Atascadero, CA News)

WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT THE AMATEUR RADIO SERVICE? Contact Perry Williams, ARRL's Washington Area Coordinator, and arrange for a personal visit by calling (202) 296-9107.

ALONG LEAGUE LINES

The Amateur Radio Service is most valuable to local communities when providing emergency communications during disasters. The Amateur Radio operator is willing to serve when called upon in times of distress. Indeed, FCC regulations (Section 97.1[a]) state that it is the amateur's responsibility to provide such emergency communications.

The American Radio Relay League endorses and sponsors Amateur Radio programs such as the Amateur Radio Emergency Services (ARES) and the National Traffic System (NTS). These groups pass radio messages ("traffic") during emergency and non-emergency situations as a public service. These groups work closely with emergency and disaster-relief agencies, such as the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, and the National Communications System (NCS, see last issue).

The Amateur Radio Service is unique in that it is a non-commercial, national (as well as international) communications service. The privileges earned by radio amateurs enable them to provide communications in a number of frequency bands rather than a limited number of channels; most amateurs have the capability to use high power to "punch" a signal through if radio conditions are marginal; the number of amateurs around the country ensures that no matter where emergency communications are needed, an amateur will be nearby, and that just about any distress call from a fellow ham will be heard.

In order to ensure that all of these systems and organizations are able to work together effectively, a Simulated Emergency Test (SET) is conducted by the ARRL each October. Four objectives guide the SET. These objectives are: (a) to test the capability of local amateur communications organizations (primarily the League's Amateur Radio Emergency Service) to function under emergency conditions; (b) to test the ability of nets (primarily the ARRL National Traffic System) to function under overload conditions; (c) to demonstrate to served agencies (such as Red Cross, civil preparedness, Salvation Army, and so forth), to the public and to the news media, Amateur Radio's value as emergency communications service; and (d) to provide operator training and expe-

Continued on page 2

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